

[A Dirty Trick on the Little Horse]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Earl Bowman

ADDRESS 86 West 12 Street

DATE February 23, 1939

SUBJECT A Dirty Trick on the Little Horse

1. Date and time of interview

2. Place of interview

Daca's Bookstore 63 Washington Square New York City

3. Name and address of informant

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

FOLKLORE

Library of Congress

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Earl Bowman

ADDRESS 86 West 12 Street

DATE February 14, 1939

SUBJECT "A DIRTY TRICK ON THE LITTLE HORSE"

Narrator, Tom Nolan (Homeless)

Age 73 years

Interview at Dacca's Bookstore

63 Washington Square, So.,

New York City "A DIRTY TRICK ON THE LITTLE HORSE"

(Told by Tom Nolan, an old-time

(horse truck driver, jobless

(by reason of old age and the

(substitution of motor trucks for

(horse trucks in New York City)

Library of Congress

(Unedited) Part 1

It was in the cave-like corner (the-'office') in the rear of Dacca's Bookstore, while the thick haze from Dacca and Tom Nolan's pipes steadily reduced the visibility, that Tom, the still husky old ex-horse truck driver, told of the most terrible "accident" in the history of trucking in New York City.

Old Tom, in no wise discounting his sympathy for the human victims of the disaster, indignantly called it, "also, a damned dirty trick on the little horse", that had without any choice on its part been made an actor in the tragedy and because of it perished with the others.

2

We were back in Dacca's place after the three of us had been around to the cheap restaurant a block away, where twenty-five cents bought a "truck-driver" order of liver and onions. So, for the time at least there was an "armistice" between us and Man's most cruel and relentless enemy-Hunger; the enemy that attacks every human creature daily and without mercy, regardless of age, sex or race, creed or color...

Our individual stomachs were full; our smokes were going; we were congenial souls, and as men at peace and who neither regret "yesterday" nor fear "tomorrow," we were in the mood for talk.

Dacca spoke of a dreadful accident of which he had read in the paper that day; an accident in which a giant motor truck had crashed into a private car...the gas tanks exploded, there was a fire, five people were burned to death....

"Those big trucks sure are bad actors when one of them does break loose and go wild," Dacca commented tersely and let it go at that. The picture was plain enough for all of us. Tom Nolan took it up from there, and this is the story he told;

Library of Congress

"Ye are right, Dacca, me boy," Old Tom who had guided horse trucks through the streets of New York for many years, began, "'Tis true, and I have observed it; when one of them big 'mankillers' such as knocked Jerry and me out of our jobs an' made us both 'obsolete' as hell, takes a notion to misbehave, it can and often does do a vast amount of damage to human life and limb and other things.

"Ten-ton trucks are not things for little boys and girls to play with, for at times they are bad actors indeed.

3

"No taxi cab, private car or any other sort of light-weight conveyance has the slightest business disputin' the right-of-way, or who shall go first with one of them damn 'mogul motor' trucks— That is the name I call them, and 'tis a good name for them, for they can be as dangerous as one of them big 'mogul' railroad locomotives would be if it decided to run on the street or highway instead of on the steel rails where it properly belongs...

"For a little car to go up against one of them in a collision is like it would be for a feather-weight amateur to get in the way of Joe Louis or Tony Gallento; one good smack and it is all over except gatherin' up the human and other fragments and clearin' the street of the wreckage.

"But distasteful and bad as they are they are necessary. People have become so numerous in New York that trucks with strength enough to carry four or five tons of potatoes or flour or beer or what have ye, and with power enough to do it fast were just as unavoidable as it was to keep little buildings from being torn down and big ones built on the spot where the little ones had been.

"They are here and there is nothing that can be done about it, and I am not complainin' even if I do get homesick sometimes for Jerry and the old horse-truck.

Library of Congress

"Since 'tis necessary to have big trucks to move big loads and do it in a damn big hurry, accidents will happen in spite of hell.

"Some of the trucks are bound to go haywire once in a while; or their drivers will go to sleep, or get drunk, or get to payin' attention to some girl on the sidewalk instead of keepin' their eyes and their minds on the job for which they are hired—which

4

is to drive th' damn truck and then hell is to pay. An accident happens and somebody, maybe four or five people at once, usually innocent bystanders who've had nothing at all to do with it in the first place, get killed or busted up in the destruction that follows.

"'Tis hell, but that is the way of it..

"But what I was reminded of, Dacca, when ye mentioned them five unfortunate victims gettin' smashed up by an 'accident' with one of them big motor trucks—then roasted in the fire that followed the tragedy ye read about in the paper, was of th' most terrible slaughter of human beings that any truck, in th' whole history of th' truckin' industry, was ever mixed up in the City of New York.

"It was no 'motor truck' as big an a box car, travelin' along th' street at thirty or forty miles an hour, that was responsible for it, or mixed in it.

"It was a damn little one-horse 'horse truck' and it was standin' still when th' disaster happened. Indeed, th' damn thing was not even big enough to be properly called a 'truck' at all, if a man sticks to th' absolute truth which of course he should always do. It was nothin' but a rickety, wobbly-wheeled (which probably needed greasin') spring wagon. The kind of rig ye can sometimes see, even these days. Some flower peddler or junk-collector will be drivin' it around the streets...and th' horse pullin' it will be bony and need curryin' and evidently doesn't get as much oats and hay as he ought to.

5

Library of Congress

“That was the sort of outfit; just an old spring wagon to which was hitched a horse scarcely larger than a polo pony in size, yet ‘twas mixed up in the most horrible and wickedest ‘truck tragedy’ in the history of New York...

“What happened? The whole damned works blowed up—exploded—distributed dreadful and bloody death all around th’ vicinity in which it happened. ‘Twas like—or must have been very much like when them ‘insurgent’ airplanes (that’s what ye call th’ bastards ain’t it?) drops bombs in the streets of one of them towns in Spain, or like the Japs are droppin’, so they say, in China.

“It was in the summer of 1920...I’m pretty sure that is the year, though I’m not always positive about dates, but never forget places or things I have seen.

“The time of day was noon and the little truck, if ye can call it a truck, certainly picked one hell of a bad place in which to blow up like it did—

“Wall Street, in front of the Subtreasury Building, straight across the street from Morgan’s.

“‘Twould take a hell of a lot of huntin’ to find a worse spot in the entire City of New York—or a worse time, for a lot of dynamite to go off.

“Imagine it if ye can, Lads— Hundreds of stenographers, clerks, messengers full of life, laughin’, kiddin’ each other, crowdin’ the walks, hurryin’ to the drug store or lunch counter for their slice of apple pie and glass of milk, or chocolate malted, or double-deck sandwich an’ cup of coffee, or whatever they were aimin’ to eat for lunch...

6

“Nobody payin’ a damned bit of attention to the little horse-wagon standin’ there at the curb in front of the Subtreasury Building; there was no red flags or “Danger” signs on it as the Law requires to warn people if it was loaded with dangerous explosives, and there was no reason for anybody to pay attention to it.

Library of Congress

"Innocent as hell it looked, standin' there, headed West toward Broad Street a few hundred feet away and on the southwest corner of which they were then startin' to put up the big building that is now there...just well started on it and still excavatin'... workin' in the rock on which 'tis built...

"Then, without an instant's warning that damned little horse-truck or, to be accurate what was in it went off;

"In th' wink of an eye more than a score...thirty-one I think it was, or maybe 'twas thirty-three of them stenographers, clerks and messengers who a breath before were alive, laughin' and happy...never dreamin' of death...were lyin' mangled and blowed to pieces...dead or dyin' there in one of the busiest and probably th' richest damned street in th' world...

"'Twas nothin' but slaughter, wholesale and hellish slaughter, Lads, that come from that little horse-wagon that day in Wall Street.

7

Part 2

"Now ye understand what I meant, Lads, when I said that no big ten-ton motor truck, deadly as they can be at times, has ever in the history of th' truckin' industry in New York City been responsible for the amount of destruction and ruin that that one little horse-wagon brought about that day in Wall Street.

"Of course th' first idea that most people had was that it 'twas a plot to blow th' Subtreasury Building and take a crack at Morgan's while they were at it. And from what th' police found it sure as hell looked like it might be just that, horrible as such a thing would be.

"th' Subtreasury Building and Morgan's and even down th' street toward th' West on th' corner across from where they were startin' to put up th' big building that is now there,

Library of Congress

there were scars on th' stone walls where slugs of iron had been flung against them by th' explosion.

“Those slugs, th' police decided were pieces of window weights...chunks of iron like ‘shrapnel’ I think they call it that is used in warfare.

“So th' newspapers and most everybody else decided that it could have been nothing but a dastardly plot of th' ‘reds’ or th' ‘communists’ or th' ‘socialists’ or some other unpopular and supposed to be wicked bunch to spread death and ruin in the center of New York City's financial district...

“Perhaps ‘twas a natural conclusion on account of those slugs of window weights that had bombarded th' buildings in th' 8 neighborhood. But when one stopped to think about it...it did seem a little curious that anybody could be such dammed fools as to think they could knock down and wreck a building like th' Subtreasury Building by exploding a bunch of small chunks of iron against th' walls of ... I thought of that when, later, I went down and looked the scene of th' carnage over, which I did th' next day.

“But anyhow, that's the way they figured it out. They figured that some fiends in human form had made a big bomb, fillin' th' center of it with dynamite, then packin' th' outside of it with cut up pieces of window weights to make it as deadly as possible; they had loaded it in th' little one horse truck behind th' innocent and unsuspecting little horse, drove it up to th' curb in front of th' Subtreasury Building and then ducked out, leaving the little horse to be blown up along with whatever unfortunate human beings who might also be blown to pieces when it went off!

“The driver of th' rig, so it was said, left th' outfit at th' curb, went down to th' new building they were working on... asked for th' boss and while waitin' for th' boss to be found, went into a telephone booth to make a call to somebody... He was in the booth when the explosion took place...

Library of Congress

"After that, nobody saw him any more. I presume that he was well aware that what was left of the wagon and th' poor little horse that had been pullin' it would not be worth trying to gather up. Besides, I imagine that he thought that was a hell of a good place to get away from and do it quick. That's what he did. And so far as I've ever been able to learn nobody knows yet who he was or where 9 he went to...or if they do know they've kept mighty still about it for all these years!

"Well, everybody thinkin' it was a bomb plot' everybody... including meself was properly horrified and indignant...

"For I tell ye, Lads, like all good citizens I have no damned use for people who blow other people up, whether they do it intentionally and with wicked motives or whether they do it through, well, I'll say carelessness and perhaps an improper disregard for th' safety of others...not only blow up human beings but also blow to pieces a poor damned little horse who was simply earnin' his oats and hay while he pulled th' rig in which the dynamite or whatever it was was being hauled... And I still say, 'twas a dirty trick on th' little on the horse

"The more I thought of it th' dirtier I thought it was.

"Suppose, I thought to meself, it had been Jerry they left standin' there to be blowed to hell when th' explosion took place. Even to think of it made me mad as hell...

"I felt, as I suppose most everyone felt, that I' like to get me hands on the devil or devils that could be guilty of buildin' a bomb and 'perpertratin' such an outrage. So, Lads, though I'm no detective and I don't claim to be smarter than most other men, even truck drivers, I did a bit of investigatin' on me own hook.

"I wanted to see what was left of that little horse that was murdered along with th' rest of th' victims. It was possible I thought that I would recognize it, for I've always been observant

Library of Congress

of horses and everyone I've noticed is a little different from every other one, and has some mark or peculiarity that makes a body 10 remember it.

"If I did recognize him I might know th' stable he came from and then 'twould look to be an easy matter to find out who th' hell took him out that day...and didn't bring him back.

"So I looked for him, but I never saw him... They took the body away immediately and sent it to Barren Island to be turned into fertilizer like I was afraid they would do Old Jerry when the damned motor trucks made him and me 'obsolete' and we lost our jobs.

"But I did see some other things, Lads. I noticed that the scars on the buildings from the window weight slugs that were supposed to be packed around th' bomb had only been fired in three directions... to each side and forward toward where they were building the new building on the corner. Then, hell, I realized it was all a mistake.

"The whole thing was an 'accident' but a damned wicked and cruel one—

"What happened was this Lads:

"Somebody wanted some dynamite that day and were in too big a hurry for it to wait for the proper time to haul it through the streets...and which certainly was not in the middle of the day when the streets were crowded.

"At the same time the same people or somebody else wanted some window-weights delivered to them too, so th' lad who was handlin' that little wagon-truck was instructed to take the stuff to where it was ordered.

"He loaded the stuff in his wagon, cordin' the window weights up in the front end of it against the back of the seat; behind the window weights he pushed in his boxes of dynamite...probably not realizin' how damned dangerous the stuff was.

Library of Congress

"Then he drove across town with it... In drivin' the window weights juggled down in each side of the dynamite boxes, and no doubt there was some fulminatin' caps in the outfit too...and I can tell ye, Lads, that fulminatin' caps and dynamite and window weights are damned poor neighbors to have close together in a wagon that is liable to be jolted or shaken a bit...

"Then he got up to the Subtreasury Building and 'twas the only place where there was a spot for him to pull into the curb, which he did. There he left the deadly load and while he was gone something happened—maybe the little horse, being hot and sweaty shook himself... which would cause the wagon to shake...a window weight might have dropped down on a spot of nitro-glycerine that had "sweat" out of the dynamite, or on a fulminatin' cap that had spilled out...

"And the 'accident happened!' All, Lads, because somebody was in too damned big a hurry to do a little blastin' in rock...and wanted their dynamite delivered at once...regardless of the Law... or the safety of human lives...

"But it was 'murder' Lads, just the same...and it also should be a lesson to all of us, drivers of these damned big motor trucks as well as other people, to never be in too big a hurry...either to deliver dynamite...or jump at conclusions as to just how anything happened!

"There ye have th' story of th' worst 'truck accident' that ever happened in New York and—Hell, Lads, 'tis time I was driftin' down to me flop house!"

That was Old Tom Nolan's story of the Great Wall Street explosion...and neither Daca or myself could doubt Old Tom's sincerity in believing that it was the TRUE STORY.

END